

# Colonel's last stand on English

*Witty prof teaches bureaucrats to fight the enemy — bad writing*

WASHINGTON (AP) — "Cut it off at the knees," Lt. Col. Tom Murawski mercilessly urges his students.

"Let it die," he counsels.

The colonel is on a search-and-destroy mission to get rid of the enemy — bad English in government writing.

Murawski, an English professor at the Air Force Academy in Colorado who is on a sabbatical, took his fight to the Commerce Department recently, leading some 1,600 employees through a 4½-hour seminar on how to improve their letters.

"You know I'm roving trouble," he told the packed auditorium of Commerce employees as he opened his "Just Plain English" course, which is liberally laced with one-liners and puns.

Murawski used examples of government letters and memos to show his students how to write better. His message: Be compact, natural and to the point.

He flashed examples of poor government writing on a screen:

"Too frequently," read one Commerce Department memo, "inadequate procurement planning, and program pressures to get a job done as quickly as possible, place procurement officials in a position whereby it is not possible for them

to realistically meet the objective of obtaining competition to the maximum extent practicable."

Armed with a red pen, he ruthlessly slashed through the memo, cutting the 43-word sentence in half. The result: "Too frequently, inadequate procurement planning and pressures to get a job done fast prevent procurement officials from obtaining the most competition."

He railed against the word "practicable," calling it a "blight upon the land." He had never seen the word in letters until he came to Washington. "Let it die," he said.

He turned the sentence, "I want you to know that I am a strong advocate of competition," into: "I strongly advocate competition."

He struck from a letter: "I sincerely appreciate your efforts in helping me to meet this extremely important objective." It's not needed, he said.

Avoid "wimpy writing," he urged. Open a letter; "socko." Readers want to know what's in it for them.

"Less is almost always better," he concluded.

A booklet given each employee spells out more ways to write better.

Readable writing, it says, sounds like people talking to each other.

Use everyday words, contractions and short sentences.

Stay away from legislative jargon and negative words. Avoid "it is" and "there is" constructions.

Murawski, a graduate of the Air Force Academy who holds a doctorate in English from the University of the Pacific in California, believes "a government of democracy should speak in democratic tones."

In the past six years, he's taken his message to thousands of people in the military, holding seminars both in the United States and overseas.

The Commerce Department sessions were the first of that size held outside the Defense Department.

Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige — who's become the Reagan administration's English maven — heard about the course and asked Murawski for his help.

Employees initially were reluctant to attend the sessions, officials said. But after word spread that the colonel livens up his teaching with humor, the seminars drew standing-room-only crowds and he's been asked to return for more sessions.

Murawski expects people to fear the worst when they enter "the church of clear writing." So he uses humor to get his point across.

"I just pull out the the stops," he said. "I can't make people improve directly. You have to go at it in roundabout ways. Telling people to write well is like telling them to be good."

His message seemed to get through.

"I love it," said Richard Meyers, a Commerce Department compliance officer. "Professors like this are hard to come by."

But did he learn anything?

"Oh, yeah," he responded, saying he planned to retrieve some just-finished work from a supervisor to spruce it up a bit more.

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